

The last word Marxist film criticism

by the Editors

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For over a century, Marxism has been a way of understanding and acting in the world, but we still find great resistance to Marxism in established film criticism. Typically, this takes various forms. There is the instant dismissal of Marxism by people who've never examined its basic ideas, much less its basic texts. Another approach is the sarcastic reference without details, exhibiting ignorance compounded by stupidity. Then there are the attempts to deny that Marxists are Marxists (Eisenstein is the classic example, Brecht's another) or to reduce their politics to a vague humanism and their works to "pure" art. Finally, there are references to Marxist aesthetics that mention only Socialist Realism, or descriptions that never mention names: as if one aspect of Marxist criticism could stand for all of its diversity, or as if it were all one undifferentiated block. This resistance to Marxism adds up to a form of censorship however "objectively" it is phrased.

What such opponents of Marxism can't explain is how it can be both an "outdated, 19th century doctrine" and yet be lived and practiced by so many of the globe's people and be of daily relevance to hundreds of millions more. In fact, most of the time Marxism is not dismissed on the grounds that it is subversive (which it certainly is), but on the basis that it is "unscholarly," "unprofessional," or "simplistic." While an isolated Marxist, if well trained in the traditional orthodoxies, can sometimes be found in the established institutions, there is little or no room for courses on Marxist film criticism or for reviews and articles which take a Marxist stance (as opposed to occasional fashionable name-dropping and flirtations with terms). Why is this the case? Why is there such a gap between Marxist criticism and orthodox criticism?

Precisely because the Marxist intellectual questions the very foundations of the accepted orthodoxy, she or he constantly returns to first principles, reconsiders initial suppositions, and repeatedly builds

arguments from the ground up, explaining and justifying each concept. When that is not done, the Marxist critic is dismissed for dealing in jargon. For example, “bourgeois art” or “class struggle” have to be taken from the beginning each time to counter instant dismissal or self-serving misunderstanding. However, by explaining these terms and concepts in detail, the Marxist is in turn criticized for being crude or unsophisticated. Jargon or crudity—it’s a double bind. The underlying truth is that the establishment knows where its interests lie and opposes Marxism in all its forms.

The relative isolation of and the hostility toward Marxist critics strengthen their dedication to developing their criticism. This dedication and the constant desire to be as clear and accessible as possible while doing justice to the complexity of the subject matter provides a great strength in Marxist film criticism: clearly asking the essential questions.

In part, the situation of Marxist film criticism can be explained by internal factors. Marxism inherently studies things on a large scale, in their greater context, as existing in relationship to many other things, and as dynamic. Bourgeois criticism, on the other hand, rests on minutiae, on teasing out a refinement, on isolating the subject matter, on a static view of the subject. Behind this traditional criticism lies a supposition: that all questions about first principles have been answered and that research is needed at the edge, not the center. The bourgeois critic’s competitive personal isolation and her/his work’s resulting fragmentation are rationalized by an ideology of specialization. Of course, orthodoxy does try to abstract from its specifics and ends up universalizing, but it is a strange form of universalizing that leaves out any analysis beyond that of isolated films. The bourgeois critic like the bourgeois politician cannot afford to examine the whole world and its interrelations because such an examination immediately undermines their accepted but unexamined presuppositions.

Besides the dramatic internal differences between these two approaches to criticism, there is an external reason for the position of Marxist criticism at present. The resources, the institutions of film criticism, are by and large constructed to screen out everything but what is already accepted, already being done. Fashion appears in the guise of change. The wholly and partially government subsidized film magazines, the commercial outlets for reviews, the film conferences, scholarships, jobs, research money, in fact the whole apparatus serves to preserve the status quo. Interestingly, while Marxism is excluded from this system, sexism, racism, and elitism are welcome. The AFI is one extreme example, but any film department would serve as one too.

In short, a certain group has control of the means of intellectual production. This doesn’t surprise Marxists, for they have an analysis of this structure. And they also have a strategy for changing it. This

strategy does not have a very fashionable name; it's called revolution.
Venceremos.

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